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ABSTRACT

This report describes the results of the Gulf County (Florida) College Counseling Project designed to raise the educational aspirations of students in rural areas who would otherwise stop their education upon completion of high school. It also describes how and why scores of young people from poor and working class homes in the Florida Panhandle were enabled to make their own investment in higher education, and sketches a model that can be readily applied elsewhere. The report chronicles the story of two schools, Port St. Joe and Wewahitchka, and the college counseling program that changed them, and demonstrates how college counseling can be a powerful force in school improvement. In addition, it traces the program from its origins to its working components, offering a step by step approach to help communities implement their own successful college counseling program. Appendices provide empirical measures indicating school and community improvement and a chronology of the Gulf County project. (GLR)

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The Chance To Dream:

A Community Success Story

Herbert F. Dalton, Jr.
David G. Erdmann

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THE CHANCE TO DREAM:
A COMMUNITY SUCCESS STORY

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The support of Mario Peña, a national expert on social and educational reform, allowed us to tell this story. Mario's wisdom and kindness have helped us and others around the country. Mario and other Plan for Social Excellence members are giving people of all ages — from Ruston, Louisiana to New York's Lower Eastside — the chance to dream.

We thank the Jessie Ball duPont Fund for its faith in our work; without its support, we would have never seen the Panhandle. George Penick, former duPont Fund executive director who now heads the Foundation for the Mid South, was wonderful to work with, as have been current executive director Ron Gallo, and program officers Sherry Magill and Mark Constantine and the duPont Fund Trustees. Clearly, we have been able to share a dream with the duPont Fund.

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We are grateful to other directors of the National College Counseling Project, Gulf County's precursor. Our earlier work with David Holmes, Tom Hayden, and Tony Roberts evolved into The Gulf County Program.

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The real heroes in this story are the citizens, teachers, and students of Gulf County; the beautiful Panhandle setting is matched only by the hearts of its residents. In Wewahitchka and Port St. Joe, pedestrians wave as you drive by. For welcoming us, for sharing and trusting us with their children and students, we thank you. Special thanks to Helen Ramsey, Sharon Gaskin, Cindy Belin, Carol Cathey, Walter Wilder, David Bidwell and members of the Community Task Force.

A number of people have helped us create this monograph. We thank Elizabeth Tuthill, Daniel Owens, Marianne Dalton, and Susan Youngwood for their researching and editing.

Ted Fiske, former *New York Times* education editor and author of the widely acclaimed book on school reform *Smart Kids, Smart Schools*, has shared his insight with us in the Preface. We wish to thank him for his invaluable contribution.

Herbert F. Dalton, Jr. consulted with the Plan for Social Excellence, Inc. between July 1 and December 31, 1991. Rick directs the Foundation for Excellent Schools, a nonprofit consulting firm that assists schools, foundations, and businesses with school improvement initiatives. Dalton also serves as executive director of the Consortium for Educational Excellence through Partnerships. Formerly he was director of enrollment planning at Middlebury College. Rick earned an Ed.D. and Ed.M. from Harvard, M.A. in English from Middlebury, and B.A. from Colgate.

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Together Dalton and Erdmann direct Partners for Educational Excellence and have directed both the Gulf County and National College Counseling Projects.

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Plan for Social Excellence, Inc.

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The Plan for Social Excellence, Inc. — a private foundation —came into being on March 16, 1990, through the change of name of The Lebensburger Foundation, which had been in existence since October 18, 1961. With the change of name came a change of missions, officers, and staff.

The Plan for Social Excellence has elected as its mission the bringing about of positive and measurable improvements in the areas of education and the environment. It supports projects that explore research results; evaluates and disseminates the results of such projects, and encourages the replication of successful projects.

As part of that effort, the Plan has sponsored the writing, printing and distribution of *The Chance To Dream: A Community Success Story.*

The objectives of the Plan are put into effect primarily through five activities; seminars, grants, scholarships, technical assistance, and publishing. During its initial phase of activities, the Plan will concentrate on educational matters. At the appropriate time in the future, it will initiate a similar set of activities in areas related to the environment.

The officers of the Plan have elected not to limit its activities to specific geographic areas. It will make grants and provide technical assistance wherever in the United States there is an opportunity to be of help. It will also distribute its publications and disseminate information about its efforts throughout the country.

The offices of the Plan for Social Excellence, Inc. are located at 116 Radio Circle, Mount Kisco, New York, 10549. The telephone number is 914-241-8690 and the telecopier number is 914-241-7476.

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Foundation Officers and Staff

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Preface

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Americans can be pretty fickle in their attitudes about things like the value of a college degree. In the early part of the 1980's it was not uncommon to hear the argument that you didn't really need a college education to make it in today's world. By the end of the decade, though, gaggles of studies had demonstrated that college graduates can expect to recoup the cost of their education, opportunity costs included, many times over in the course of a working lifetime. Parents and students alike came to view a college education as an "investment" and, as with any investment, many recognized that it makes sense to "buy up" and get into the best college or university you could.

As with so many of the good things of the 1980's, though, not everyone was in a position to benefit from this new view of higher education. The 1980's was an era of economic polarization in which the rich got richer and the poor got poorer. It was also an era of educational polarization. The rising costs of undergraduate instruction, sharp cutbacks in Federal tuition assistance and other factors conspired to make the dream of a college education increasingly elusive for millions of young people. Since we live in an information age, one where knowledge itself is cheap but the ability to gain and control it is power, this prospect of becoming a country of educational haves and have-nots is an invitation to social chaos.

This is the threat that the Gulf County College Counseling Project set out to address: how to raise the educational aspirations of students in rural areas whose every instinct is to take their high school diploma and, like their parents before them, march down to the local factory in hopes of landing a job that, if all went well, would endure for a working lifetime. *The Chance to Dream* describes how and why scores of young people from poor and working class homes in the Florida Panhandle were enabled to make their own "investment" in higher education. More importantly, it sketches a model that can be readily applied elsewhere.

The Chance to Dream can be read on several levels. It is a "how to" manual for educators and others who seek to bolster the college-going rate in their own localities. Dalton and Erdmann, the "duPont boys," are clear in their goals; they know how to listen, plan, regroup after mistakes. They lay out —- step by step — the means by which the goal of enhanced access to quality higher education can be reached.

It can also be read as a political treatise— and as a subversive one at that. As currently organized, American public schools are among the most thoroughly political institutions we have. That's because they take economically and socially

disenfranchised students where they are and, through means such as tracking, lower teacher expectations and the like, make sure that the vast majority of students stay right there. The "duPont boys," on the other hand, show how schools can be used to change the status quo. These guys are radicals.

Finally, this monograph can be read as the heartwarming story of people. It is the story of the Michelles who were led to shed their blinders and reach for the academic stars. It is the story of dedicated teachers and administrators — the kind that can be found in *all* schools — who simply needed new tools and of families empowered to have aspirations that previously they dared not entertain.

One of the best parts of the counseling project is the chance it gives students to travel. Young people who have never gone further than grandmother's house board busses to visit colleges— which is to say that they see new places and meet all kinds of interesting people. Little do they know how far they are really going, for they are embarking on journeys that are internal as well as external. The late Kingman Brewster, Jr., the former president of Yale University, once observed that the power of a liberal education is that it enables you to see things that the uneducated person does not see and have thoughts that the untutored find incomprehensible, and it assures you that you will become neither "bored with life" nor "a crushing bore to those whose company you keep."

Things will never be the same in Wewahitchka and all those other places with wonderful people and unpronounceable names. And that's nice.

Edward B. Fiske
Stanford, California
October, 1991

THE CHANCE TO DREAM:
A COMMUNITY SUCCESS STORY

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Michelle's Story

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Michelle grew up in Wewahitchka, a small town near the Gulf of Mexico on the eastern edge of the Florida panhandle.

Shy and quiet, Michelle is the oldest daughter of divorced parents. She lives with her mother, who works at a convenience store, and three younger siblings. They have no telephone.

Throughout high school, Michelle juggled family responsibilities with school activities. She often would walk down to the elementary school after classes, pick up her younger brother and sister and return with them to the high school so she could participate in student council and sports. Her grades reflected her hard work — she was an honors student.

With her high grades and varied school activities, Michelle qualified for several top-notch colleges. But she had planned to apply to only the local community college. Then, through a program that started in her junior year, Michelle learned about other college options. She discovered that financial aid would make it possible for her to afford more expensive schools. Visiting her school's new college counseling center and listening to her guidance counselor, Michelle uncovered a new world — colleges with exciting academic programs and extracurricular activities that matched her specific interests.

Michelle applied to several colleges; many she had never heard of just six months before. She got into her first choice, a highly competitive college in Central Florida. And she decided to go, especially when an attractive financial aid package — she received $18,000 in financial assistance — made it possible for her to afford the tuition, room and board. Her family's contribution came to $900, earned in a summer job waiting tables.

Michelle recently finished her freshman year. Normally reserved, she bubbled with excitement over the memories of that year.

"It was all so great, going away to college," Michelle says. "My friend Heather, who was in my precalculus class, got me involved in crew. 'Just come down, you'll like it,' she said. I had never heard of crew. We traveled to Augusta, Oakridge, and Philadelphia. That was the most exciting time because I'd never been on a

plane before. It was great doing something together on a team."

Michelle made the dean's list. "It really wasn't that hard," she says. "I'm making plans to go to Australia my junior year. I can't wait!"

Her high school guidance counselor, Sharon Gaskin, spotted Michelle at the Panama City Walmart during a recent vacation. "There was a glow in her face, Gaskin remembers. "She walked with confidence. She was a different kid."

Michelle's story tells of both one girl's success and a whole community's evolution. Last spring, the students at Wewahitchka High School assessed the college counseling program that launched Michelle's college experience. "I learned you don't have to be rich to go to college," one junior writes. "If Michelle can do it, so can I."

"It didn't just feel good. The change was something we could wrap our arms around and sink our teeth in."
— Gulf County Teacher

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Introduction

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In 1988, two high schools in rural Gulf County Florida created a program that prodded, cajoled, and rewarded Michelle and other students to raise their aspirations. The results were dramatic.

The number of students pursuing a college education rose by 60 percent. Drop-out rates reached the best in the state. More students enrolled in challenging courses, achieved the honor roll and took college entrance exams. And more parents took an interest in their children's education.

The Chance to Dream chronicles the story of these two schools and the college counseling program that changed them. It is a story that demonstrates a simple tenet—that college counseling can be a powerful force in school improvement. It can inspire students, empower teachers, enfranchise parents and motivate administrators. The Gulf County story can help other communities improve their schools.

"The Gulf County effort provides a model for other communities and schools," reports Hillary Clinton, education advocate and wife of Arkansas governor Bill Clinton. "When you link programs and people around shared themes, it's possible to create grass roots education change. Who can argue with raising aspirations?"

The Gulf County model evolved from three years of research and development by the National College Counseling Project (NCCP). This nonprofit research project established the link between college counseling and school improvement. NCCP's research not only confirmed a maxim of American education and society — those who need help the most receive the least — it also provided a blueprint to help other schools improve their programs.

Gulf County is filled with many hard-working, middle-class families. This area fights conditions that wrack many of America's schools, where educational resources are limited. Many students see few frontiers of choice open to them. "Going to college is like traveling to the moon — they are clueless about how to get there and see no reason for the trip," says Phyllis McCabe of DeWitt Clinton High School in the Bronx.

Whether students hail from the inner city of San Antonio, the woods of Mt. Katadin, Maine, or the shores of Sitka, Alaska, a combination of factors limits their aspirations. Many of these students are:

- Raised in communities where the measures of success have become cars, clothes, and sometimes, drugs. "Why attend college when I can earn more money than my teacher by just going to high school?" is a question we hear repeatedly.
- Isolated from many opportunities of American life. Many of these students rarely leave their neighborhoods.
- Allowed by their parents, teachers, and communities to "buy down" in their educational aspirations. One teacher recently told us, "The challenge for many of my students is to find creative ways to avoid the challenge."
- Facing limited resources. Their schools have fewer counselors, fewer accelerated courses, and fewer enrichment activities. We repeatedly saw the correlation between family income and college attendance: The more impoverished the family the less likely that student will attend college. Although the Gulf County model uses a blueprint for change that we developed, community implementers can design their own improvement program. The Gulf County model targets high schools because elementary and middle schools take their cues from high schools. In the program's second year, Gulf County high school students began working with middle school students. When we heard college-bound seniors tell a group of middle schoolers, "Study hard and don't slough off," there was no doubt, the younger students were listening.

Gulf County gave its students the chance to dream. In the words of guidance counselor Carol Cathey, "By getting students to take their choices up a notch, we increased the expectations of students, parents, and teachers."

The Chance to Dream traces this program from its roots to its working components, offering concrete steps to help communities implement their own successful college counseling program. Education can make a difference in students' lives. It can raise their income levels, improve job satisfaction, boost morale, raise self-worth. By giving students a chance to dream, we are opening a door to expanded options and brighter futures.

CHAPTER ONE

"This program moves our school. It motivates kids, gives meaning to the work our teachers do, and it connects parents to us."

— Michigan High School Principal

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Roots: A Three-Year Odyssey

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"Don't apply to college. You won't get in, and your family can't afford it anyway."

While on a recruiting trip through eastern Massachusetts in 1982, David Erdmann, then director of undergraduate admissions at Rennselaer Polytechnic Institute, overheard a teacher speaking to a senior. He was shocked to hear such discouraging words.

That same year, a barrage of school reform reports were published that overlooked college counseling as an agent of change. The National Commission on Excellence, in its report Nation at Risk, recommended educational overhaul through public policy initiatives. While Ernest Boyer in High School wrote about the need to link colleges and high schools, he failed to mention the existent conduit: college counseling.

In his years as a college admissions officer, Erdmann witnessed the power of college counseling. He believed that it could change students' lives and improve schools.

In his years as a college admissions officer, Erdmann witnessed the power of college counseling. He believed that it could change students' lives and improve schools. Motivated by that teacher's words, Erdmann launched the National College Counseling Project in 1982. He asked another admissions director, two university researchers, and a secondary school counselor to explore with him the relationship between college counseling and school improvement. This exploration turned into a three-year odyssey and produced a comprehensive assessment of college counseling.

The study began in 1984, when a mail survey was sent to 2,200 randomly selected high schools to gather information on school profiles, college counseling

programs, and counselors' perceptions of the process. Fifty-two percent of the schools responded, and computerized analysis of the data was conducted at the University of Vermont. The national media, including The New York Times, Boston Globe, Education Week, and the Chronicle of Higher Education, reported the findings.

In March of 1985, Charles Marshall, executive director of the National Association of College Admissions Counselors, approached the project directors. "We'd like to sponsor NCCP and offer you financial backing from the Teagle Foundation for the next two phases," wrote Marshall. NACAC sponsorship and support gave NCCP a renewed momentum to approach its final two phases.

In the second year, 35 field researchers, primarily guidance counselors and admissions directors, nominated 115 exemplary programs. Dean Whitla, Director of Instructional Research and Evaluation at Harvard and an NCCP advisory board member, best defined exemplary when he paraphrased Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart: "While I can't define exemplary college counseling, I know it when I see it."

By creating interest in and motivation for teaching and learning, vigorous college counseling can actually enrich a school's academic and extracurricular offerings and...These programs open students' eyes to the value of education, and the way it can shape their future.

Exemplary college counseling programs can help students beat the odds. While many of their peers drop out or take minimum-wage jobs, students from exemplary programs are more likely to find the courage to continue their education. NCCP showed that exemplary college counseling can occur in a wide diversity of locations, independent of economic, social, and ethnic factors.

The project directors, with recommendations from their advisory board, then chose 13 high schools for closer study. A team of two NCCP directors and a counselor from a nearby high school visited each school. During their two-day visits, teams identified unique features of the college counseling program; evaluated the role of principal, teachers, and parents; probed the school environment; and determined how the program became exemplary. Site captains wrote visit reports that, along with data and information from phases I and II, were reviewed by David Holmes, one of the NCCP directors, who then edited a report on the project, called Frontiers of Possibility.

This report drew several conclusions. Perhaps the most significant was the close link it revealed between a strong college counseling program and school improvement. By creating interest in and motivation for teaching and learning, vigorous college counseling can actually enrich a school's academic and extracurricular offerings and improve test scores, drop-out rates and graduation rates. These programs open students' eyes to the value of education, its role in their lives

and the way it can shape their future.

What makes some college counseling programs better than others?

As the counselor at an inner city San Antonio high school said about initial NCCP findings, "You know the meal tastes good. It's good for you. Now, what's the recipe?"

Three ingredients are key to successful college counseling programs:

• Support of the surrounding community. As one West Virginia counselor said, "If the community doesn't buy into what we're doing, we literally don't have their support. It just can't happen."

• Personal characteristics of the counselor. Motivation is the secret here. Counselors should be strong student advocates and skilled managers; and possess political savvy.

Motivation is the secret here. Counselors should be strong student advocates and skilled managers; and possess political savvy.

• Leadership of the principal. In all but one of the 13 schools, the principal and head counselor had a leadership alliance and shared a vision. These principals realize that a strong counseling program enhances their school. A Michigan high school principal said, "It's in my best interest to make sure that Evelyn has the support she needs. This program moves our school. It motivates kids, gives meaning to the work our teachers do, and it connects parents to us."

The final chapter of Frontiers of Possibility also offered concrete advice. Strategies to create effective college counseling programs are:

1. Develop a college guidance curriculum. As one counselor said, "Have a plan and start early." Many successful programs have a progression of skills and exercises that begin in the early grades and help lead students to self awareness and maturity as they move toward the college transition.

2. Help students and their families find money for college. Only when families believe that financial obstacles are surmountable will they think seriously about postsecondary education. They need help from filling out forms to accessing scholarships.

3. Pick the right people. From principal and guidance counselor to teacher aides, staff must be motivated and supportive. Superintendent Walter Wilder's assignment of key faculty to counseling positions contributed to Gulf County's success.

4. Let the setting send the message. Schools need a welcoming space for college counseling where students can access information they need. In one inner city school in Los Angeles, pictures of successful graduates and banners from their colleges and universities adorn the walls, delivering a message to current students that says, according to the counselor: "You can do it!"

5. Enlist faculty. Exemplary college counseling and good teaching complement one another. Teachers must reinforce counselors by allowing students to share the dream of postsecondary education and by ensuring access to college

prep classes for students who have not traditionally been tracked toward college.

6. Involve parents. Without the support of parents, college counseling goals and school improvement cannot be realized.

7. Communicate with students and parents. Bulletin boards, newsletters, telephone calls, cable television, and radio are among the media counselors can use to communicate with parents and students.

8. Celebrate student achievement. One high school had an end-of-year assembly where its guidance counselor recognized on stage (in front of younger students) all graduating seniors who had received scholarships. According to the counselor, this assembly delivers a message to the younger students: "That can be me in a year or two."

9. Involve colleges. Enterprising counselors enlist the support of admissions and financial aid directors to conduct programs on their high school campuses.

Shortly after Frontiers was published, the Jessie Ball duPont Fund's executive director, George Penick, asked us to put the NCCP principles into practice. Penick and the duPont Fund trustees wanted to help strengthen postsecondary educational participation in either the Northern Neck of Virginia or Gulf County, Florida. The Fund's charter limits its grantmaking to those institutions Jessie Ball duPont supported in her lifetime.

Our task was to determine which community would be most receptive to a duPont-supported initiative and then to design a program tailored to the region. Prior to day-long site visits to meet with community members, principals, guidance personnel, students, and teachers, we reviewed demographic community profiles and used NCCP-developed surveys to measure each school's college counseling services and status.

Involve parents. Without the support of parents, college counseling goals and school improvement cannot be realized.

Florida's Gulf County and Virginia's Northern Neck mirror rural communities throughout the country. Their high schools are small. NCCP's research showed that 53 percent of the nation's high schools are small, defined as an enrollment of less than 500 students. These and other NCCP findings on school type are consistent with studies by James Coleman, The College Board, and others. In both the Northern Neck and Gulf County, postsecondary participation rates were slightly below the national average but within the typical range for rural schools. Most graduates who attend college do so within 75 miles of their homes, and students were exposed to a small number of postsecondary options.

We were looking for the region most ripe for change. Not only students and teachers but parents and community members would embark with us on a journey where they needed to set aside old attitudes and behaviors and embrace something new and unconfirmed.

CHAPTER TWO

"If it's good for kids, we want to do it."
— Sarah Riley, Port St. Joe Guidance Counselor

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Initial Visits: Lessons from the Country

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A four-by-six foot sign sits on the lawn of the Port St. Joe High School. "Welcome Rick Dalton and David Erdmann."

It is May 1987. Our journey to find a school and a community begins.

Port St. Joe is a small town, the county seat of Gulf County, Florida. To get there, we fly into Panama City, 35 miles up the coast.

Panama City is known for beaches that extend west to Pensacola. Discovered in the 1940s by Georgia and Alabama vacationers, these pristine beaches have replaced Ft. Lauderdale and Daytona as spring breakers' mecca.

Driving east from Panama City on U.S. 98, we pass pinewood scrub brush, mom-and-pop restaurants, $37-a-night hotels, and beauty parlors. This is a land time has forgotten. The innocence is broken by ten miles of Tyndall Air Force Base with its low slung F-16s and masses of one-story brick structures. Just beyond Tyndall lies Mexico Beach, on the western end of Gulf County.

Gulf County, population 13,000, sits on the southern shore of Florida's Panhandle region, 120 miles east of Mobile, Alabama, and 75 miles southwest of Tallahassee. The county has beaches, lakes, and woods spread over its 559 square miles.

This is a land time has forgotten. The innocence is broken by ten miles of Tyndall Air Force Base with its low slung F-16s and masses of one-story brick structures.

Like much of rural America, Gulf County is poor. Recent census figures report an annual income of $10,452. Its unemployment rate of just over 8 percent ranks it 58th of 67 Florida counties. More than 30 percent of Gulf County students qualify for free or reduced lunches under Federal programs.

The racial mixture in Gulf County is 20 percent black, 80 percent white. Although segregation officially ended 30 years ago, black students sit mostly with other black students in the cafeterias at both high schools. Yet two prominent

educational leaders in Gulf County, Sarah Riley and Principal Edwin Williams, are black.

As we travel along U.S. 98, passing seasonal motels, convenience stores, and unoccupied condominiums, we cross from Central to Eastern time. The dividing line cuts Mexico Beach in half. In fact, the two Gulf County high schools, Port St. Joe and Wewahitchka, lie in different time zones, split by the railroad. "I can make the opening of both high schools," chuckles Walter Wilder, district superintendent.

Several students feel college will be difficult and most think they're not prepared. "The only college folks I know are teachers and they don't make as much as my dad," says one student.

Smoke from the Port St. Joe Paper Mill travels the ten miles to Mexico Beach. Trucks loaded with pulp wood thunder through the town.

"It's kind of an ideal life," we're told by Allison, a high school senior. "We can catch bass in the lakes, shrimp in the gulf, and hunt in the woods," explains her classmate, John. The lifestyle has kept generation after generation in Gulf County, and as we learn from an English teacher, it's one reason students have so little exposure to the outside world. "Most of the travel children do is to see grandparents and other relatives. When your kin live nearby, you don't get those opportunities."

Our host at Port St. Joe High is Sarah Riley. A counselor in her fifties, Riley is the definition of kinetic energy — trying to keep up with her is exhausting. She tells us, as we dart through the hallway to our student meeting, "If it's good for kids, we want to do it."

The next day we travel 24 miles inland to Wewahitchka, a town of just 1,500. Its Indian name means "water eyes." We tour the school with principal Mack Eubank. He shows us the vocational education center's pond where students learn how to raise catfish.

Later that day we talk individually with teachers, many of whom grew up in the community. Sharon Gaskin, physical education teacher and local bank owner's wife, tells us "I came through the system. I've been through it. Teachers have always made a difference here."

As we talk with Wewa students, we notice a lack of academic self-confidence that impedes college participation. Just thirteen of last year's 48 graduates went to college, 12 of them to Gulf Coast Community College. Several students feel college will be difficult and most think they're not prepared. "The only college folks I know are teachers and they don't make as much as my dad," says one student. Indeed, factory workers, with overtime, can earn upwards of $40,000 a year, $10,000 to $15,000 more than teachers.

Despite this hesitant attitude, students seem interested in what we have to say about college opportunities.

That same ambivalence toward postsecondary education strikes us at the two

high schools we visit in the Northern Neck of Virginia.

After landing at the Richmond airport, we drive 90 miles east. Crossing the Rapahannic Bridge and heading into rural Virginia, we pass stately white farms with neatly trimmed paddocks and manicured gardens that belong to gentleman farmers, many of them retirees from Washington, D.C. and Baltimore. We also spy trailers and dilapidated houses covered with tar paper, revealing divergent socioeconomic status; later we learn that 3,000 of these Northern Neck residences lack indoor plumbing.

Crab houses, sewing factories, and farms dot the region. Thirty percent of the residents have less than an eighth grade education. Although the median income is just over $14,000, that statistic is deceptive. One resident explains, "Most folks around here are either rich or poor." The equal split of black and white residents is both racial and economic. "The rich folks are all white," we learn from the owner of a small convenience store.

Teachers at both high schools speak about discipline problems and the difficulty of motivating students. One community member offers an explanation, "Kids are just interested in cars and money." The town manager reveals: "Athletics are the rallying point; it isn't the books."

"We want to help our kids" is a theme we hear repeated by teachers and community members in Florida.

Although drugs are not a problem, alcohol and teenage pregnancy are. "Students don't see the connection between education and life beyond high school," offers one school board member. Many high school graduates from this rural area can make more money than their teachers. "It's difficult to motivate kids toward education if your father's a fisherman making $40,000 a year," the principal confides. About one-third of the high school graduates pursue postsecondary education, and most of these students attend the local community college.

Money is a big obstacle. "Parents don't understand how to fill out the forms, and they aren't willing to ask for help," the guidance counselor laments. The principal remarks offhandedly, "I know several more who would go if they had the money."

After visiting Virginia and Florida, after talking to teachers, students and staff at four high schools, we realize that their problems are remarkably similar. Even the language used to describe their situation is alike. Deciding between these two regions is difficult.

We decide to recommend Gulf County to the Jessie Ball duPont Fund. There is a certain ambivalence to change in Virginia, while Gulf County seems eager for it. "We want to help our kids" is a theme we hear repeated by teachers and community members in Florida. Hoping to return someday to the Northern Neck, we set our sights on the Panhandle.

CHAPTER THREE

"I'm glad you're here."
— Walter Wilder, Gulf County Superintendent

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The Gulf County Program: Whatever it Takes

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It's a near perfect day in October 1987 — 85 degrees, a faint wisp of clouds scattered across a blue sky, and a soft Gulf breeze blowing, as we walk into the Gulf County Courthouse through the metal detector. Superintendent Walter Wilder's office is in the Courthouse, where jurors are being selected to try last August's sensational courthouse murder. There, during a heated divorce trial, an estranged husband wielding a gun ran through the court chambers. He found the judge in the men's toilet stall, shot and killed him and then chased his wife and her lawyer through the building.

Twelve students, among Gulf County's best and brightest, have a dozen different dreams, yet their aggregate list includes only three postsecondary choices.

A beefy security guard directs us to Wilder's office, "Straight ahead, first right, then all the way back on the left." Before we can take a second sip of coffee, Walter Wilder steps outside his door, "Come on in men. I'm glad you're here."

With white hair, brown eyes, and a burly build, Wilder looks more like an ex-tackle than a former professional center fielder. Elected by voters rather than appointed by a school board, Wilder shows us why he appeals to the electorate. He's direct, compassionate, and savvy. Our mission is to discuss the project blueprint. Wilder quickly grasps our plan and pledges his support: "I'll do what it takes to see that these kids get every chance possible." Together we assemble names for the task force, a group that will later take the program into the community.

Later that morning, at Port St. Joe High School, we speak with two student groups, a dozen college-bound seniors and juniors. "I want to be a petroleum

engineer, but I want to have fun in college," responds Robert, a tall, lanky senior. Themes reoccur. Twelve students, among Gulf County's best and brightest, have a dozen different dreams, yet their aggregate list includes only three postsecondary choices. We later ask the students about their narrow choice set, and repeatedly they respond, "We can't afford those high-priced colleges."

They look at us in disbelief; "duPont liars," they appear to be thinking. It is clear from this session: there is a big job to be done.

That evening we meet with parents in a well-publicized meeting, "Going to College, What You Need to Know." Only fourteen parents, representing both high schools, show up for the presentation by the "duPont Boys," as we're known around the county. We tell the parents about our day in the schools, about the possibility of duPont funded scholarships, and then ask for questions. No one raises a hand. Finally a hand beckons, "How much duPont scholarship money is there?" An avalanche of questions follows, almost every one focusing on scholarships and how to pay for college. We explain how colleges assess financial need, and then reveal how it can cost less to attend a $20,000 university than the local community college. They look at us in disbelief; "duPont liars," they appear to be thinking. It is clear from this session: there is a big job to be done.

CHAPTER FOUR

"Parents, we couldn't have done it without them"
— Carol Cathey, Port St. Joe Guidance Counselor

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The Program's Recipe: Ingredients for Change

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Fried catfish, shrimp gumbo, hush puppies, cherry cheesecake; the table groans with food. "Raised 'em ourselves. We've got about 10,000 acres of catfish ponds," explains Gene Raffield, chief executive officer of Raffield Fisheries and community task force member.

But eating good food is not the purpose of this meeting. It is now March 1988, and we are meeting with 15 task force members to begin charting a three-year plan that will improve the college counseling program at the two Gulf County high schools.

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A dozen components evolved as the core of the program:

1. Community Task Force. The college counseling project began in Gulf County when Walter Wilder assembled a community group of Port St. Joe and Wewahitchka residents— parents, educators, and business people. According to Helen Ramsey, first project coordinator, "He'd been fishing with many of them. He knew and trusted these people, and he turned over what was dear to them." The task force provided advice, hosted the teacher workshops, raised scholarship dollars, and helped communicate the program to the larger community.

2. Teacher Involvement: The community task force's first step was to host a seminar in June 1988 for 21 teachers, which soon became nicknamed the "21 Workshop." The goal was to involve teachers in the college counseling process.

The workshop featured three outsiders —David Holmes of the U.S. Department of Education, Susan Grady, head of a secondary school in Tampa, and Bruce Richardson, Vermont's assistant commissioner of education. During this

two-day session, the group developed strategies to help students pursue postsecondary options.

That fall Holmes conducted a follow-up workshop, where the 21 teachers discussed student learning, leadership, and change. The teachers came up with several ideas that were later implemented — offering more financial aid workshops, creating college centers at each high school, sponsoring bus trips to colleges, and producing a video tape and brochures on the college counseling program.

Two other workshops were designed for teachers. Jim Lathrop, head of test preparation at Maurice Salter Associates in Los Angeles, conducted a teacher workshop on SAT preparation. In March of 1989, David Holmes returned with Ed Ducharme of the University of Vermont to conduct a workshop for 55 teachers on writing for college.

Teachers helped change the schools' culture. Cindy Belin, Port St. Joe guidance counselor, says, "Now there are classroom discussions about college. Teachers reinforce what we do in the college counseling center." Coaches are also involved. Now Port St. Joe coaches give an award to the athlete with the highest scholastic average. "The football coach shortened practice so his players could attend SAT review; this would have been unheard of four years ago," said Port St. Joe guidance counselor Carol Cathey.

The Project's mission was complemented by the Teachers As Advisors Program (TAP), a state-sponsored initiative introduced to Gulf County in the spring of 1989. TAP provides each student with a teacher who serves as a mentor throughout high school. "The college counseling project gave a mission to TAP and other efforts," says David Bidwell, current on-site coordinator.

3. College Support: Before the college counseling project, Gulf Coast Community College provided the most assistance to the two Gulf County high schools. While the Gulf Coast alliance remains strong, Wewahitchka and Port St. Joe high schools have developed links with other schools: University of West Florida, University of Florida, Rollins College, and Agnes Scott College.

"The football coach shortened practice so his players could attend SAT review; this would have been unheard of four years ago," said guidance counselor Carol Cathey.

Financial aid directors from Gulf Coast Community College and Florida State University led parent programs, while Rollins' aid director conducted two intensive workshops for Gulf County counselors and teachers. The University of Florida's admissions director spoke to parents about how their children can best prepare for college, while the admissions director from Agnes Scott worked with Sharon Gaskin to arrange the Georgia college trip. Additionally, other colleges hosted Gulf County students on their campuses.

4. Parents. Parents are a crucial part of the equation needed to increase postsecondary participation. Realizing this, we targeted parents from the program's inception. One component of the point system (initiative #11) is parental participation at college awareness presentations. The effort to include parents worked. Wewahitchka guidance counselor Sharon Gaskin says, "Parents seem more comfortable with the school. They are more apt to come into school and ask questions."

Parents are a crucial part of the equation needed to increase postsecondary participation. Realizing this, we targeted parents from the program's inception.

"Students no longer think it's not cool for parents to come to school. It's now cool for parents to come to school," says Port St. Joe guidance counselor Carol Cathey. And when asked about parents' impact on the program's success, Cathey responds: "We couldn't do it any other way."

5. Financial Aid Training: Gulf County students and parents had difficulty understanding the way college financial aid works. This is not surprising because the economics of postsecondary education are counter intuitive. Students and parents were perplexed: How can it be financially worthwhile to give up four years of earning money at the mill? Why would anyone give me money to attend college? How could it cost the same to attend a private college as a community college? As one Gulf County mother said, "All of this seems like the lottery. I can't believe my chances of winning are very good."

"When we began to make progress on the money front, everything else fell into place," says Walter Wilder. The National College Counseling Project established the absolute need for financial aid information and expertise in filling out financial aid forms. Educating and helping Gulf County parents and students with financial aid was an ongoing battle, and there was a need to increase the number of messengers: teachers, counselors, and finally students like Michelle who became the "walking proof," as one student put it.

The task force chose three counselors and three teachers from the two high schools to become financial aid experts. Linda Downing, Director of Financial Aid at Rollins College, led two eight-hour training sessions, one in Gulf County, the other at Rollins, to train these six educators in the methodology of financial aid assessment and sources of financial aid. In each of the last two years, aid directors from Florida State University and Gulf Coast Community College have conducted evening workshops for parents.

"The form scares the hell out of parents. I just try to make them feel comfortable with it," Sharon Gaskin explains. Gaskin recalls a Wewahitchka mother who could not read or write. The mother brought in the financial aid form, and Gaskin helped her fill it out. "If we couldn't help our families like this,

they wouldn't fill the forms out. The dream would be over. None of this would have happened."

6. Test Awareness: "Our students score lower on college entrance standardized tests than they should, and many of them just won't sign up," confided former Wewahitchka guidance counselor Bruce Beegle during our first visit. College-bound students must find their way through the standardized-test maze.

The Gulf County Project initiated three strategies to help students with standardized tests.

Outside experts trained faculty and task force members, making them aware of how the test is used in college admissions. Test-preparation courses were offered to students. And we successfully petitioned the College Board to make Port St. Joe High School a College Board test site, meaning that students no longer had to travel 60 minutes to take the SAT. Wendy, a Port St. Joe High senior who took the SAT for the second time at her own school, speaks for many others: "It was less frightening to be in my own school. I know it's one of the reasons I improved my scores."

Sharon Gaskin describes how she handled the test phobia of one of her students: "I had a senior who took the PSAT. It scared him and he wouldn't take the SAT. I spent hours convincing him that he could do it. It wasn't so much what I said; it was the fact that I stayed with him." The number of Gulf County students taking the SAT and ACT more than doubled in three years.

Test-preparation courses were offered to students. And we successfully petitioned the College Board to make Port St. Joe High School a College Board test site.

7. College Center: Following a "21 Workshop" recommendation, guidance counselors at both high schools created college centers to reinforce the college message. Shelves of books and up-to-date technology inform students about postsecondary opportunities. Computer software, donated by Peterson's, an educational information firm, allows students to match their interests with the names of appropriate college choices. Edwin Williams, Port St. Joe High School principal, describes the college center as "the visual, symbolic center of our school." Dozens of college pennants and posters — blazoned with names like Duke, Agnes Scott, and Cornell — adorn the center and also can be found tacked onto bulletin boards throughout the school.

8. Bus trips: "It's difficult to get kids to consider going away to college when they haven't seen a college campus," comments a Port St. Joe High science teacher. Following a recommendation of the "21 Workshop," Gulf County students took two field trips to colleges. In April 1989, 60 juniors and seniors took a three-day excursion to three Florida colleges: Rollins College, Stetson College, and Florida Southern University. For many it was their first extended trip outside the county, and their first college visit. Again in September 1990, 75 juniors and

Gulf County Scholarship Program
Credit Summary Sheet

Name _____ Student ID# _____

School _____ Social Security # _____

Grade _____ Year _____ Home Address _____

Home Telephone # _____ _____

GENERAL INFORMATION:
This form must be filed each year on or before JUNE 15th. An applicant MUST be accepted by a school/college on or before MAY 1st of SENIOR YEAR to be eligible for this program. The STUDENT is RESPONSIBLE for obtaining and COMPLETING THIS FORM.

Category: **ATTENDANCE**
Criteria: No absences - 5 pts.
1 or 2 absences - 4 pts.
3 or 4 absences - 3 pts.
Points: Grade 7_____
Grade 8 _____
Grade 9 _____
Grade 10 _____
Grade 11 _____
Grade 12 _____
Sub Total _____

Category: **STANDARDIZED TESTS**
Criteria: PSAT (one time a year) - Grade 10 - 4 pts. Grade 11 - 2 pts.
ACT (up to twice a year) - Grade 11 - 4 pts. Grade 12 - 2 pts.
SAT (up to twice a year) - Grade 11 - 4 pts. Grade 12 - 2 pts.
Points: Grade 7 ___(NA)_____
Grade 8 ___(NA)_____
Grade 9 ___(NA)_____
Grade 10 _____
Grade 11 _____
Grade 12 _____
Sub Total _____

This Section for Graduating Senior - **ONLY**

POINT TABULATION:
Attendance Points _____ (Maximum: 30 pts.)
Academic Achievement Points
_____ (Max.: 112 pts.)
Standardized Tests Points
_____ (Max: 30 pts.)
Parental Participation Points
_____ (Max: 30 pts.)
Total # Points _____

Category: **ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT**
Criteria: Grade "A" - 2 pts./sem/grade
Grade "B" - 1 pt./sem/grade
Points: Grade 7 ____(NA)____
Grade 8 ____(NA)____
Grade 9 _____
Grade 10 _____
Grade 11 _____
Grade 12 _____
Sub Total _____

Category: **PARENTAL PARTICIPATION IN WORKSHOPS**
Criteria: Workshop on Preparing for College - 5 pts.
Workshop on College Selection - 5 pts.
Workshop on Financial Aid - 5 pts.
Other Workshop Approved by Task Force - 5 pts.
(a student may earn a maximum of 30 pts. in this category)
Grade 7 _____ Grade 10 _____
Grade 8 _____ Grade 11 _____
Grade 9 _____ Grade 12 _____
Sub Total _____

SCHOOL/COLLEGE ACCEPTANCE
Name of School/College _____
School/College Address _____
_____
Date Accepted_____

LEVEL OF SCHOOL/COLLEGE
Criteria: Vo Tech School - Pts. x 1
2 yr. College - Pts. x 2
4 yr. Public College - Pts. x 7
4 yr. Private College - Pts. x 20
_____ x _____ = _____
(Total Pts.) (Multiplier) (Weighted Pts.)

CERTIFICATION
I certify the above information to be accurate.

_____ _____ _____
Student Signature Parent/Guardian Signature Date

High School Certification
The above information has been verified by:
_____: School Official
_____: Position
_____: Date

seniors visited Georgia colleges: Agnes Scott College, Emory University, and Olgethorpe University. Students stayed in college dormitories, ate in dining halls, visited student unions, and met college students. "It was so much fun, best trip I ever took," confides Tracey, now a senior at Port St. Joe High. "If I hadn't taken the trip, I probably would have gone to Gulf Coast. I wouldn't have had the courage to leave home."

9. Counselors: The cornerstone of the Gulf County Project was the counselors who set the tone for change by taking risks themselves. All three became financial aid experts, and started participating in and speaking at professional meetings and regional gatherings of The College Board, The Southern Association of College Admissions Counselors, and The American Association of Higher Education. One parent seemed to speak for many others when she assessed the college counseling program: "More than anything, the counselors' expectations seemed to change. They led the charge. They wouldn't let our kids or us settle for less."

Carol Cathey, Port St. Joe guidance counselor, believes, "It's not the point system but what it promotes that leads to college participation."

10. Communication. Another of the project's key challenges was communicating information to all Gulf County constituents — students, parents, teachers, task force members, and community. Local media, such as cable television and local newspapers; bulletin boards; and a monthly calendar to parents all played a role. In Wewahitchka, Sharon Gaskin made frequent telephone calls to parents and even visited homes when necessary.

11. Point System: In the spring of 1990, Gulf County introduced an incentive program for students. Beginning in the seventh grade, students could earn credits for their attendance record, academic performance, number of standardized tests taken, and parental participation in designated college programs. These credits are converted into scholarships that are awarded when students enter college. On the previous page is a Credit Summary Sheet that explains how credits are computed:

As the form explains, students receive a maximum of 112 points for academic achievement and 30 points for each other area.

The points accumulated by a student are then multiplied by a number ranging from one for a vocational or technical school to 20 for a private four-year college, depending on where the student is headed. This multiplier reflects the cost difference at various types of postsecondary options. The total number of points earned by all students is then divided by the money in the annual scholarship fund, which amounted to $20,000 in 1990 — a $10,000 grant from the duPont Fund plus a $5,000 duPont Fund contribution to match $5,000 raised by the community.

In 1990, dollar awards ranged from $133 to $2,898. The program's purpose is

not to pay a student's college bill, but to provide incentive for college-going. Carol Cathey, Port St. Joe guidance counselor, believes, "It's not the point system but what it promotes that leads to college participation."

"You raise aspirations and motivation increases. Then kids do more homework; they become more focused about learning. Then it all kicks in."

12. Academic Recognition: "Learning is what the duPont program is all about," a Port St. Joe junior revealed to us in the program's third year. He was on target. The most highly weighted component in the point system is grades in college prep courses.

Several signs show that students are more concerned about educational attainment as a result of this program. Twice as many students achieved honor roll status at the end than at the beginning of the project. There is momentum to "buy up" within the curriculum; while Port St. Joe used to have difficulty filling its basic chemistry class, it now offers advanced chemistry.

"You raise aspirations and motivation increases. Then kids do more homework; they become more focused about learning. Then it all kicks in," says David Bidwell, director of instructional services and on-site coordinator for the project.

CHAPTER FIVE

"They used to buy down, now they're buying up."
— Cindy Belin, Port St. Joe guidance counselor

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Impact: Effect on Community and School

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Terry Gunnell, admissions dean at Georgia's LaGrange College, tells this story to a group of counselors and admissions directors at a recent workshop.

"It's October 1986. I attend a fair for Gulf County's high school students in Port St. Joe. It's a bust. The kids are lethargic. It seems like they show up just to get out of class. I recommend that we not go back to the Port St. Joe college fair.

"Three years later, admissions colleagues speak to me about a great college fair in Port St. Joe. I decide to go back in October 1990. Kids are well prepared and they ask great questions. They are hungry for college information. What a difference in four years!"

This story echoes what Gulf County students, parents, teachers, and other residents are saying. In May 1991, Gulf County students fill out forms that describe changes they have seen in their schools over the last three years. A Port St. Joe senior writes, "My friends and I are more serious about studying. It used to be cool to not work hard, now it's okay to work hard."

A Port St. Joe senior writes, "My friends and I are more serious about studying. It used to be cool to not work hard, now it's okay to work hard."

Port St. Joe guidance counselors describe the change in different ways: Carol Cathey tells how three years ago, "Four parents wouldn't fill out financial aid forms. This year not one parent is even hesitating."

Port St. Joe's other counselor, Cindy Belin, notices higher aspirations in the school: She estimates that 75 percent of the students wanted curriculum upgrades this year. "Would you believe, they wanted to take tougher courses? They used to buy down, now they're buying up." Helen Ramsey, the first on-site coordinator, describes changes she sees in Port St. Joe: "You walk into J. Patrick's or Motel St. Joe Restaurant and people are

talking about financial aid. Or you walk into a convenience store and there are fliers announcing an upcoming college prep program. It permeates the community. It's different visually."

Superintendent Walter Wilder tells what is happening in Wewahitchka: "There is more hope and higher aspirations in Wewa today than I have seen in 20 years. There are more kids going on to higher education than ever before: the result of a push from the school."

Wewahitchka guidance counselor Sharon Gaskin tells: "Attitudes are changing. Parents are asking what scholarships their children should apply for. They call and they ask, 'what should we do?' Parents are demanding information. Four years ago they didn't ask any questions.

"The financial aid form continues to freak everybody out. In the past parents wouldn't complete it because they didn't understand it. Now they know it's okay not to know, and they're not inhibited about asking questions. They're comfortable enough to ask questions and we're knowledgeable enough to give good answers. That's what this project is all about."

The table below shows empirical improvement in the Gulf County schools.

GULF COUNTY CHANGES

	1986	1990
Average Daily Attendance	92.00%	96.00%
Dropout Rate	3.44%	1.88%
Graduation Rate	90.50%	98.10%
Postsecondary Participation	50.00%	80.00%

Since the beginning of the college counseling program, the average daily attendance rate increased four percent; the dropout rate was nearly cut in half; the graduation rate increased by 8.4 percent; and the number of students pursuing postsecondary education increased by 60 percent.

These changes measure the community's attitude toward education, according to Mario Peña, executive director of the Plan for Social Excellence. Attendance is not a function of the school, but a function of the school and community cooperating together. The college counseling program is a community project, anchored in what is happening in the school.

An incident at the post office bears this out. When Carol Cathey, Port St. Joe guidance counselor was in line to buy stamps, a postal worker asked about a

recent college information session at the high school. Before Carol could respond, a man behind her piped up, "I couldn't go to college because I couldn't afford it." The postal worker quickly corrected him, "Now wait a minute; anyone can go to college, all you need is the drive. There's money out there."

The postal worker and other community members are aware that their children or neighbor's children can attend college. Parents feel comfortable in the schools. Students see the connection between school and opportunity beyond; they are buying up. These behavioral shifts are perhaps more important than statistical changes, such as dropout and graduation rates. Behavioral changes mean that the program is here to stay.

At our final college night program in May of 1991, 125 parents show up. Many arrive 30 minutes before the program begins to find a good seat. Three college-bound seniors, two college freshmen, and three college graduates who are Gulf County residents speak about their educational experiences. One recent graduate tells the parents, "College might as well be required if you want options."

Local dentist, Dusty May, tells a spellbound audience: "From the day you're born, it's give and take. You give and people take away. But education is the one thing no one can take away from you."

Why did the program succeed? Leadership from the chief educational officer, support from the community, and guidance from the project directors and other consultants contributed to the project's success.

Walter Wilder was committed from the beginning. He provided an on-site coordinator to manage the project and communicate with the project directors, task force, educators, and other community members. In the first year, Helen Ramsey, director of instructional services, assumed the coordinator's position. When Ramsey's husband became terminally ill, Barbara Shirley Scott, a recently retired Wewahitchka teacher, took over the reins. At the end of the project's second year, Barbara Shirley retired again, and David Bidwell, director of instructional services for the district, took over the coordinator's position.

"From the day you're born, it's give and take. You give and people take away. But education is the one thing no one can take away from you."

In the project's second year, Wilder made key personnel changes. Three dynamic young teachers became counselors, Cindy Belin and Carol Cathey at Port St. Joe and Sharon Gaskin at Wewahitchka.

As project directors, we provided a blueprint for change, the conviction that it could happen, guidance and occasional prodding. During the three years, we were often in phone contact with the on-site coordinator and guidance personnel, and we made four to six two-day visits annually. Carol Cathey describes the impact of our visits: "You clean your house when company's coming."

We met with students, parents, faculty, and guidance counselors at both high schools as well as Walter Wilder and the on-site coordinator. During the first two years, we directed task force meetings, turning over meeting reins in the third year to on-site coordinator David Bidwell. Throughout, we provided technical assistance in such areas as scholarship program and workshop design. We walked a fine line: we wanted to help but we did not want to usurp the community's ownership of the program.

The three-year Gulf County journey had its bumps.

Two contretemps took the project off course. In December 1988, the Community Task Force's Scholarship Committee chair spoke at a luncheon where he promised more matching funds than were available. This honest but embarrassing mistake caused the Scholarship Committee chair to withdraw from the Task Force. It also underscored the importance and difficulty of communication.

Some students, parents, and teachers were hostile. But as Ramsey explains, "What saved it all was you faced us; you came back. We knew then that you cared."

Then in the early winter of 1989, David Erdmann was misquoted while speaking to a guidance counselors' gathering in Orlando. Erdmann spoke about the difficulty of convincing many rural students to forgo the immediate gratification of earning money after high school for college. A reporter from the Orlando Sentinel attended the session and wrote about the project, saying that Gulf County kids just want "designer jeans and pick-up trucks."

When Gulf County residents learned about the article, they were "fit to be tied," according to Helen Ramsey. "I was very ticked. We almost lost it," says Ramsey.

When we returned to Gulf County two weeks later, it was a tense visit. Some students, parents, and teachers were hostile. But as Ramsey explains, "What saved it all was you faced us; you came back. We knew then that you cared."

CHAPTER SIX

"Through the project, we helped our students dream bigger dreams."

— Gulf County Teacher

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Blueprint: Spreading the News

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The Gulf County story is more than just a romantic tale about students in a Florida Panhandle community dreaming bigger dreams. It is about removing barriers of race and money and social class. It is about increasing opportunity so that as one guidance counselor said, "the kid in the little house can have the same dream as the kid in the big house." Both can enjoy the opportunity that postsecondary education brings.

All students deserve the chance to "dream bigger dreams." Parents want to give their kids the chance to dream. And so do schools and communities. Most schools and communities want to increase postsecondary participation, graduation and attendance rates, and wish to lower the number of students who drop out.

At an August 1991 institute to help communities establish school improvement programs, Randy Radliff, who heads the Chamber of Commerce in Cave City, Arkansas, told us, "Most parents want to give their kids the right things. The problem is they just don't know what to give them." The same thing can be said about communities and schools — they just aren't sure how to accomplish these goals.

Here's how. Below is an eight-step approach to improve schools through a college counseling model.

1. Take a frank look at where you are. Before you think about change, be honest about your school and community's status. A community leader from Mississippi says, "I want to be objective about what's happening in our school, but where do I start?" Begin by answering the following questions: What are your attendance, graduation, and college participation rates? How many of your students are enrolled in college preparatory classes? What student groups, if any, are excluded? How many of your students take standardized college admissions tests? What are the college selection patterns of your students? Answers to these questions will help identify community expectations and student needs.

2. Build a support base for change. Your next step: build a team. Start with a core group that will focus on mission and help you select a task force. In Gulf County, the core was Dalton, Erdmann, Wilder, and Helen Ramsey, the first on-site coordinator.

Next, decide who should be on your task force. In addition to community leaders who can help motivate others, include those who can assume specific tasks. For example, you may want task force members who can help raise dollars, access the media, and give legal advice. Linking school and community is an essential role of the task force and also an important component of school improvement.

3. Articulate your goals. Your core team's first step will be to determine the program's mission. We recently worked with a team of educators and citizens from Knox, Indiana, that was setting up a program modeled after Gulf County. Their mission is to encourage each student to take another step on his or her education journey. Gulf County's mission was similar to Knox's. We wanted each student not intending to graduate from high school to pursue a high school diploma; those not headed for college to attend a two-year college; those headed for a two-year college to consider a four-year college or university.

Once your team agrees on a mission, ask members to describe how they see the school and the community vis a vis mission. Why would the school (and the community) be supportive of a program that encourages each student to take another step? And why not? Do you have a shared perception of the school and community?

4. Determine what factors influence your ability to achieve goals. To chart a path to school improvement, identify school strengths and weaknesses, and then community opportunities and threats.

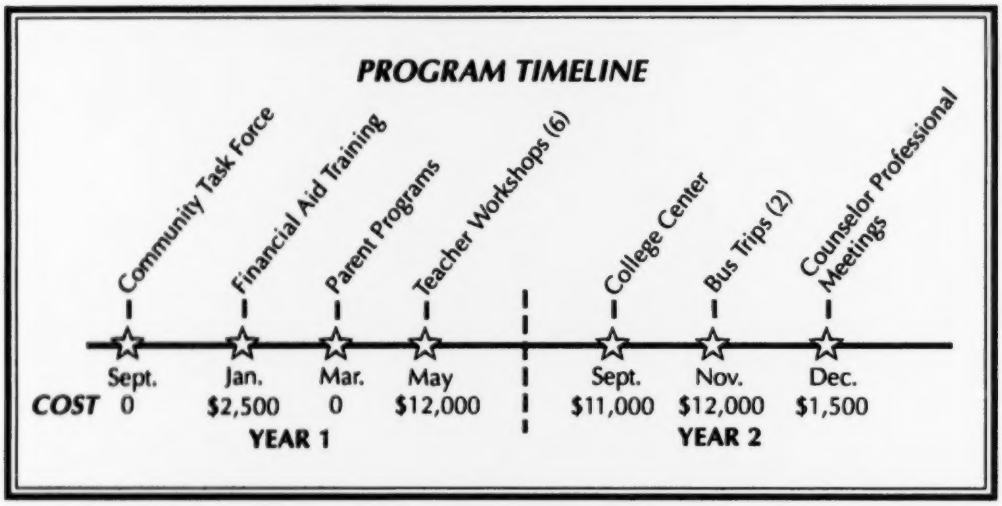
SCHOOL	
Strengths	**Weaknesses**
Principal committed to change	Low college participation
New, enthusiastic counselor	Lack of parental support
COMMUNITY	
Opportunities	**Threats**
Large retired population	Slumping local economy
Community pride	Few college role models

A core team from South Carolina created the list above; they called it their "pluses and minuses." Many communities face these same forces. The South Carolina team lists a principal committed to change and a new enthusiastic guidance counselor as school strengths. School weaknesses, on the other hand,

are absence of parental support and a low college participation rate.

External opportunities include a large number of retirees and community pride. A slumping local economy and a community with few college graduates to serve as role models are viewed as obstacles.

5. Set a course, and tailor it to your school and community. Next, you need to select and rank strategies for achieving your goals. Strategies should be designed to capitalize on your strengths and opportunities and to minimize weaknesses and threats. To determine priority, decide which strategy can best allow you to achieve your mission and which are most viable, given allotted resources.



The South Carolina team would want to harness the committed principal and the new, energetic counselor as team members; these school leaders can help implement and sustain a school improvement program. The retirees represent a potential source of program volunteers who could run a college center or write newsletters. Community pride could provide the motivational force for school improvement.

On the other hand, low college participation, although a school weakness, may, in fact, be why the South Carolina community is establishing a program. The second listed weakness, lack of parental support, calls for strategies that can enfranchise parents, such as evening programs on going to college and financial aid.

The slumping economy and few college role models would be perceived as threats by many communities. A slumping economy speaks to the practical need for a college education, but it makes raising program funding difficult. Pickens County, Georgia, met this challenge when 75 percent of its public employees agreed to contribute five dollars a month to a scholarship program, totalling $30,000 in the first year. Few college role models mean that special efforts need to be made to expose students to college graduates. Gulf County has met this

challenge by having local dentist Dusty May and others speak to students and parents at evening programs.

Chapter Four provides a menu of initiatives, some of which may be appropriate for your program. Rank strategies and set a timeline for implementation, as in the chart on page 23.

This table shows that a community task force will be assembled in September of the first year and that there is no anticipated cost. The bus trips to colleges, however, are budgeted at $12,000, and the first one will occur in November of the second year.

6. Estimate cost of each strategy and allocate resources. Once you set a course, begin to determine a budget. Some of your expenses will be sweat equity; the community task force and evening parent programs have no dollar cost, though they require a significant time contribution. Colleges are generally willing to contribute financial aid and admissions advice through workshops pro bono. Thekla Shackleford, president of a program that promises every Columbus, Ohio, high school graduate a college education, says "Get whatever you can for free. People are willing to contribute to a non profit." Your program will be attractive to donors if it has tax exempt status; to set this up, you will need legal assistance. There are no sure-fire formulas for determining program costs. It is a matter of tailoring programs to needs and resources. Excluding scholarship monies, the annual cost of the Gulf County Program was $30,000, all of which the Jessie Ball duPont Fund provided.

Your program will be attractive to donors if it has tax exempt status; to set this up, you will need legal assistance. There are no sure-fire formulas for determining program costs.

7. Assess your program. From the beginning, you will want clear, measurable goals. In the early stages you are unlikely to see gains in college participation rates, so focus instead on interim measures such as expanding your honor roll, increasing the number of students taking standardized tests, and increasing enrollment in college prep classes. Gulf County saw increases in the number of parents attending evening programs shortly after the program began.

Keep good data so you can measure progress over time. Data also can help raise money from funders. Gayle Dorman, Education Director at the Lilly Endowment, says, "Potential funders want to know if the program is working."

8. Implement strategies, assess effectiveness, and revise when necessary. Once you implement a strategy, you will want to assess its effectiveness. Don't be afraid to jettison a particular initiative that has limited impact and to make adaptations when necessary. When few Wewahitchka parents initially came to evening programs on financial aid, Sharon Gaskin made house calls to speak with parents individually.

CHAPTER SEVEN

"I saw energy and commitment rallying around a common cause — improving communities and schools."
— Hillary Clinton

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Postscript: The Journey Continues

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It's a muggy August evening in the Atlanta suburb of Decatur. An audience of 52 sit riveted to their chairs as Helen Ramsey recounts the saga of the Gulf County College Counseling Project. "We learned as much as the kids, maybe more," says Ramsey as she talks about the community task force, teacher initiatives, use of the media, and the point system.

When Ramsey stops to answer questions, everyone wants to hear more about the point system. We are reminded of our first evening program in Gulf County when cost and money questions dominated the discussion. The Decatur audience is hooked on the point system, Gulf County's unique contribution to educational reform. Carol Cathey adamantly explains, "It wasn't the point system. It was what the point system stood for." Cathey continues, "We set a goal for every student to go one step further in their education. Then, we made everything — from state mandates to local ideas to the point system — into a tool for accomplishing this goal."

"We set a goal for every student to go one step further in their education. Then, we made everything into a tool for accomplishing this goal."

In the audience sits Hillary Clinton, the dynamic education proponent and wife of Arkansas governor Bill Clinton. Hillary had planned to leave the Institute shortly after her keynote dinner address, but she stays until 9:30 to hear the Gulf County story unfold. "At the Partners Institute I saw energy and commitment rallying around a common cause — improving communities and schools. Communities need to take responsibility for their schools, and the Partners approach gives communities direction, while allowing them to tailor their own plan."

The Decatur group is part of Partners for Educational Excellence, the sequel to

the Gulf County Project. The Partners program was funded by the Jessie Ball duPont Fund to take the Gulf County College Counseling Project to its next level. We selected eight colleges that met duPont Fund criteria and asked each of them, in turn, to pick a partner school with room for postsecondary growth. We ended up with nine teams when the Lilly Endowment funded a group from its home state of Indiana. Each school/college partner brought a team of five — college admissions director, high school principal, guidance counselor, high school teacher, and community member — to a three-day training institute on the campus of Agnes Scott College.

PARTNERS FOR EDUCATIONAL EXCELLENCE

Agnes Scott College (GA)	Pickens County HS
Ancilla College (IN)	Knox HS
Arkansas College	Cave City HS
Chipola Junior College (FL)	Marianna HS
Converse College (SC)	James F. Byrnes HS
LaGrange College (GA)	Villa Rica HS
Mississippi Valley State University	Greenwood HS
Rollins College (FL)	Maynard Evans HS
Xavier University of New Orleans (LA)	Warren Easton HS

At the Partners Institute, nine instructors, including Gulf County's Helen Ramsey and Carol Cathey, taught sessions on: developing a strategic plan, increasing college awareness, financing a college education, involving the community, developing a college awareness curriculum and building school support.

During each session, instructors presented material first and then the class divided into nine teams. Teams discussed how to incorporate presented material into their plan. Finally, all the teams reconvened to share and to test the direction of their plan.

Groups arrived uncertain about their mission and methods for changing their schools. They left the Institute eager to begin, committed to a common vision and armed with strategies for improving postsecondary participation in their schools. Over the next two years, we will work with each team both from afar and on-site.

Steve Sailor, principal of Indiana's Knox High School — located in a county with one of the highest welfare and dropout rates and lowest college-going rates in the state — talks about what is now happening in his community. "Since returning from the Partners Institute, we've selected someone from the local

college to handle public relations, held an executive information session with the Board of Education, printed 'spots' about college in athletic programs, hung banners and college information in stairwells, and opened a college information center — we've even cut a deal with Pepsi Cola to donate college selection software.

"The community is asking questions about the program. We've challenged our students to set goals beyond their own experiences. We already see attitudes changing in the school."

Life will never be the same for the students at Knox High School and their families. The changes brought by involvement in a college counseling project can be painful.

But change is not always easy. Life will never be the same for the students at Knox High School and their families. The changes brought by involvement in a college counseling project can be painful.

Debbie recently graduated from Port St. Joe High School. The first person in her family to attend college, Debbie was a student council member and top student.

Like Michelle, Debbie had planned to attend Gulf Coast Community College until her sophomore year, when she learned about financial aid through the College Counseling Program. According to guidance counselor Cindy Belin, "For three years, Debbie and her parents didn't miss an evening program."

Shortly after Debbie left for college in Tennessee, her father stopped by to chat with Belin. "His eyes watered up when he talked about Debbie," Belin says. "He wanted her to stay close to home, but Debbie wanted to go further."

Some of her classmates are traveling far from home, too.

Peter, who lives with his mother, a substitute bus driver, and a younger brother, began his freshman year at an upstate New York college to pursue his dream of becoming a professional photographer.

And Russell recently boarded a bus to attend college in Missouri; his church paid for his bus ticket.

The Gulf County community gave Michelle, Debbie, Peter, and Russell the chance to dream. "Sometimes it's a bittersweet dream," says Port St. Joe principal Edwin Williams. "These kids and families have heard the phrase 'You can't go home again,' and they're apprehensive."

Superintendent Walter Wilder says, "Without education our kids have nothing, but with education, there is a way. They have a future." Each of these students and the generations of Partners students who follow can go home again. They can leave and they can return. They will have choices. They will have the chance to dream, the greatest gift a school and community can give.

APPENDIX I

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Empirical Measures

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When dropout rates decrease or graduation, attendance, or postsecondary participation rates increase, communities are jubilant. These are the indices of school and community improvement. Four useful empirical measures of school effectiveness and change are dropout, graduation, attendance, and postsecondary participation rates.

The problem in relying on these measures, however, is that they are often derived inconsistently. Dropout rates, for example, can be calculated in several acceptable ways, so that comparisons between different schools or regions may be specious.

The most widely used definition of **dropout** refers to persons who are not in school and are not high school graduates. Rates that reveal the number of these persons are called **Status Dropout Rates**, and show the extent of the dropout problem in the population over time. The **Event Dropout Rate** measures the proportion of students who drop out in a single year without completing high school. This rate reveals the number of students who leave high school each year, allowing a year-by-year comparison.

In October of 1989, the U.S. Department of Education reported a **Status Dropout Rate** among the nation's 16 to 24-year-olds of 12.6 percent (15.1 percent in the South, the second highest region). The nation's **Event Dropout Rate** during this period was 4.5 percent (5.1 percent for the South) for 15 to 24-year-olds in grades 10 through 12.

The **Status Dropout Rate** is always higher than the **Event Dropout Rate**, as it represents the cumulative impact of annual dropout rates over several years.

In Florida, **dropout rates** are calculated by dividing the number of students who drop out in a single year by the fall enrollment figure. This number, therefore, may not include all those in the 15-to-24-year-old age group. In the 1989-90 year, Florida recorded a 6.47 percent **dropout rate** for grades 9 through 12. In 1989-90, the Gulf County School District had a **dropout rate** of 1.88 percent among its high school students. This is the lowest in the state, and the only district which fell below 2 percent in the last two years.

Graduation is the formal recognition given to a student who successfully completes a prescribed program of study. In 1980, the percentage of those 18 and older in the United States who completed 12 years or more of schooling was 66.5

percent, according to census figures. For the South Atlantic States, this figure was 60.2 percent, and for Gulf County 58.6 percent.

In Florida, the **graduation rate** is calculated as a four-year figure, comparing the number of graduates to the number of 9th graders who were in school at the same site four years earlier. In 1988-89, this rate was 71 percent. This number does not include GED's, and does not allow for in-out migration, grade acceleration or grade repetition.

The **graduation rate** for Gulf County measures those who enter grade 12 and actually graduate. In 1986-87, the district **graduation rate** was 90.5 percent, compared to a national rate of 91.5 percent. In 1989-90, the Gulf County **graduation rate** was 98.1 percent.

National data collection for absenteeism looks at **Average Daily Attendance (ADA)** rates as a percentage of **Average Daily Membership (ADM)**. The **ADA** refers to the aggregate attendance of a school during a reporting period, normally a school year, divided by the number of days school is in session during this period. This is measured as a percentage of **ADM,** the average number of pupils belonging, those present as well as those absent, when school is in session. These numbers reflect **ADA** for both elementary and secondary schools.

In 1989-90, the national **ADA** was 92.4 percent, and so the absentee rate was 7.6 percent. In Florida, the ADA was 92.5 percent in 1986-87 and 91.9 percent in 1889-90; the **absentee rate** thus increased from 7.5 percent to 8.1 percent. In Gulf County, the 1989-90 **ADA** was 96 percent, the highest in Northwest Florida.

The term **postsecondary education** refers to formal instruction programs with a curriculum designed primarily for students who have completed the requirements for a high school diploma or its equivalent. These programs can be academic, vocational, or professional, but do not include avocational and adult basic educational programs. National **postsecondary education rates** ranged from 53.8 percent to 58.9 percent in recent years. According to the Bureau of the Census, however, the percentage of high school graduates age 18 to 24 enrolled in college in 1988 was 37.3 percent. This discrepancy reveals the difficulty of proportional calculations in measuring the **postsecondary participation rate** among a cohort.

In 1986, 50 percent of Gulf County's high school graduates pursued post-secondary educational options, compared to 80 percent in 1990. During each of the project's three years, there was an increase in the percentage of high school graduates pursuing postsecondary educational options.

APPENDIX II

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Gulf County Chronology

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GULF COUNTY COLLEGE
COUNSELING PROJECT CHRONOLOGY

May 1987	Site visit to Gulf County
Sept 1987	Met with superintendent; visit schools; parent meeting
Oct 1987	Initial Community Task Force meeting
Dec 1987	Task force meeting: establish seven initiatives and three committees
Jan 1988	Task Force meeting: David Holmes visits, work toward initiatives and with committees
Mar 1988	Task Force meeting and dinner at Gene Raffield's office, testing consultant visits
May 1988	Task Force meeting: plan for summer workshop
Jun 1988	Two-day workshop with 21 teachers to identify concerns and establish action plan
Sept 1988	Planning committee established in each Gulf County school
Sept 1988	Task Force meeting and testing consultant offers workshop for teachers
Oct 1988	Workshop follow-up: "Group of 21" establishes four committees: financial aid, academics, college counseling, and community
Jan 1989	Task Force; four committees report progress
Feb 1989	Financial aid workshop at Rollins for counselors and three teachers
Mar 1989	Workshop for teachers: writing for college
Apr 1989	Bus trip for 60 students to central Florida colleges
May 1989	College Board establishes Port St. Joe Test Site
Aug 1989	Peterson's donates college counseling software to high schools

Oct 1989	Financial aid follow-up workshop for counselors and teachers at Rollins
Apr 1990	Task Force meeting: scholarship brochure ready for community, test prep available at schools
May 1990	Task Force meeting: scholarship inventory sheets available
Jun 1990	College-bound seniors awarded "point system" scholarships
Sept 1990	Bus trip: 75 students spend three days at Georgia colleges
Oct 1990	Task Force meeting
Jan 1991	Task Force meeting
May 1991	Task Force meeting; celebration dinner

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